DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 221 IR 053 516

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TITLE	Distance Education and the Changing Role of the Library Media Specialist. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, Syracuse, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-IR-90-5
PUB DATE	Nov 90
CONTRACT	RI88062008
NOTE	4p.; This digest is based on a monograph, "Distance Education and the Changing Role of the Library Media Specialist," by Michael A. Burke, which is in the ERIC database as ED 321 775.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, 030 Huntington Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244-2340 (free while supply lasts).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) --
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cooperative Planning; *Distance Education; *Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; *Futures (of Society); *Learning Resources Centers; *Library Role; *Media Specialists; School Libraries
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Librarian Teacher Cooperation

ABSTRACT

Demographic and economic trends indicate that in the future there will be fewer teachers available to teach growing K-12 school enrollments. In addition to this, public education is also experiencing funding shortages. Distance education seems to provide a solution for both of these problems as it offers an equitable way to distribute educational resources, while at the same time making instruction cost-effective. School library media specialists can contribute to developing distance education programs through their roles as instructional consultant, information specialist, teacher, and technological coordinator. They can help to match information resources to course objectives, teaching and learning styles, and subject content to facilitate more creative thinking and critical analysis among students. It is the lack of involvement of individuals, not the course structure, that is the main obstacle to effective distance education programs. The success of a distance education program depends upon the ability of library media specialists to network with teachers, students, administrators, technical experts, and database vendors. An example of a successful program can be seen in the Bay Area (Wisconsin) Public School District. (References and additional readings are provided.) (MAB)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST

by

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ERIC Digest
EDO-IR-90-5

November 1990

IR053516

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ERIC DIGEST

November 1990

EDO-IR-90-5

Distance Education and the Changing Role of the Library Media Specialist

This digest is based on *Distance Education and the Changing Role of the Library Media Specialist,* by Michael A. Burke.

When classes are conducted via communications media with little face-to-face contact between teachers and students, as is the case in distance education, problems are inevitable. Distance education is so depersonalized and distance education courses so tightly structured that students can feel stifled and lose motivation. Library media specialists can help by taking a proactive role in distance education efforts, from instructional design to media resource development to inservice training for staff.

Need for Change

Demographic and economic trends point to major problems for public education in the coming decade. Foremost among these trends is the inverse relationship between increasing K-12 enrollments and declining workforces. At the same time that many members of the currently aging workforce will be retiring, school systems will be hard pressed to hire replacements due to a decrease in eligible college graduates. These graduates, especially women, will also have a variety of other career options. Thus fewer teachers will be available to teach fewer courses, a situation that is likely to affect special populations of students most. These populations include an increasing proportion of black and Hispanic students, and students in small and rural schools. Finally, and most importantly, public education is experiencing a funding crisis exacerbated by a general lack of electorate and federal support for public education among a graying national population.

These trends have led to a growing interest in distance education, especially at the federal level. Distance education is seen both as a way to offer more equitable distribution of educational resources to special populations of students, and as a way to make instruction more cost-effective by sharing teachers and instructional materials. School library media specialists play an important role in projections for improving the quality of distance education.

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Role of the Library Media Specialist

The publication *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (1988) states that the mission of the school library media program is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. This mission presents at least four challenges to library media specialists:

1. Provide physical access to information and ideas for a diverse population whose needs are rapidly changing.

2. Provide equity and freedom of access to information and resources for all students regardless of sex, age, race, creed, or socioeconomic background.

3. Provide leadership and expertise in the use of information and instructional technology.

4. Become proactive in participating in distance education activities and networks that enhance access to resources located outside the school, community, or state.

Library media specialists must actually play several roles in order to contribute to instructional design and program development for distance education. These roles include instructional consultant, information specialist, teacher, and technological coordinator.

Instructional Design

Recent research warns that distance education courses have been structured and packaged so tightly that learners have no choice in what they learn or how they learn it, thus inhibiting creative thinking and critical analysis. This, along with the impersonal nature of distance education, contributes to a lack of motivation among students.

In order to support distance learning, library media specialists serve as instructional consultants to course designers and teachers. Their role is to match information resources to course objectives, teaching and learning styles, and subject content. If distance courses are to provide more individualized assignments, students must be able to access a variety of resources themselves. Library media specialists can facilitate access in several ways:

1. Identify resources and their locations: provide bibliographies.

2. Make access easier: provide multiple copies and packages of materials, develop flexible lending policies, acquire additional playback devices for audio and video.

3. Encourage interaction among faculty and students: identify or provide ways for them to interact, such as teleconferencing or group meetings, and places for them to meet, such as study areas and field trips.

Along with all this, the responsibility for developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills is greater than ever. Library media staff must continue to serve as teachers in providing skills instruction in accessing, understanding, and using information in a variety of print and nonprint formats. There must be a commitment to continuing inservice library media staff training in instructional design and information skills teaching.

Program Development

The primary obstacle to effectiveness in distance education programs is not the structure of courses, but the "no-involvement" attitude of individuals. When library media specialists and teachers decide to become involved, they can work as a team to select, produce, and distribute the necessary instructional materials.

In distance education, this process requires training in the communication technologies that make it possible for the library media center to serve as the hub of an instructional and informational system. In the role of technical coordinator, the library media specialist must be able to evaluate, select, manage, and use technologies such as interactive and cable television, microwave relay, satellites, fiber optics, and computers. Again in this area, there must be a commitment to training library media staff. The same technologies that are used for student instruction can be and are being used for professional instruction.

Cooperation and networking of all kinds are essential to program development in distance education. In addition to communicating with teachers and students, library media specialists may work closely with government officials, school administrators, technical experts, university media centers, and database vendors.

Large-scale distance education programs, especially at the secondary school level, have been implemented in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Texas, Virginia, and other states. A notable case study is the Instructional Television Fixed Service (ITFS) system in the Green Bay Area (WI) Public School District, where author Burke serves as Director of Instructional Resources. The success of all these programs depends in large part on the close cooperation of education agencies at federal, state, and local levels. For example, several recent ventures have come about as a result of the federally funded Star Schools Initiative begun in 1989. Three organizations receiving Star Schools funding are The Satellite Educational Resources Consortium (SERC) of which Wisconsin is a member; The TI-IN United Star Network, which serves Indian and Chapter I schools in 16 states; and Technical Education Resources, Inc. (TERC), which deals with math and science courses through 11 centers across the United States.

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This digest, based on *Distance Education and the Changing Role of the Library Media Specialist* by Michael A. Burke, was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources by Linda Schamber, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University. November 1990.

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